

# MOTIVATIONS

---

## An Interview with Peggy Bulger

*Interviewed by Betty Belanus*

I interviewed Peggy Bulger, the Director of the American Folklife Center [AFC] at the Library of Congress, on September 30, 1999. My intern, Tracy Clonts, was also present at the interview. Peggy comes to the AFC after serving as a folklorist in Florida for twelve years and as folklorist/administrator for the regional arts organization, the Southern Arts Federation for ten years. She began as Director of the AFC in July 1999. She is also, at this writing, the *President Elect* of the American Folklore Society. Although her current position puts her among the high echelon of folklore jobs, she is considered among other public folklorists as “just one of us” and likes it that way. Our interview covered her personal reasons for entering the field of folklore, going back for a Ph.D. after having worked in the public sector for many years, and her visions for the future of the AFC and AFS.

BB: I wanted first to get a little bit of personal background. What got you interested in the whole field of folklore to begin with?

PB: I’m probably pretty typical of people my age. I was a teenager and got interested in folk music because it was the sixties and there was a big folk revival going on. I grew up in upstate New York where there was a very strong folk revival movement. A lot of people were doing festivals. I met Pete Seeger and people connected with the Fox Hollow Folk Festival. So, I started playing the guitar and singing and got into a singing group, then I really got interested in researching the songs that we were singing.

Of course I was doing this all on my own because I had no idea you could study this stuff for real. I was an art major because I was also interested in studio art. Then I found out that you could study folklore. That was a total revelation for me. It combined everything I was interested in. So, I ended up going back to graduate school for folklore at Western Kentucky University. I actually was told about Western Kentucky from Bruce Buckley, then head of the graduate program at Cooperstown who was good friends with Lynn Montell,

who had just started the Western Kentucky program. I was in the second class that graduated with a Masters of Folk Studies.

BB: So who was teaching there then? Lynwood Montell? Was Cam Collins there yet?

PB: Cam had just gotten there, but she couldn't teach graduate courses because she hadn't finished her dissertation yet. So, she was teaching an introduction to folklore class for undergraduates. Ken and Mary Clarke were there, and they were the three in the department who taught in the Folklore Program. Jim Wayne Miller, who is a poet, also taught narrative and other oral tradition courses. But the main people I worked with were Ken and Mary and Lynwood. It was a pretty small program. There were only about eight of us.

BB: What made you decide to go to a masters program instead of a Ph.D. program?

PB: I never thought I would go for a Ph.D. I really just wanted to do my own music and have some way of incorporating that into whatever kind of work I did. I didn't have a lot of money at the time and Western offered me a fellowship. I think that happens a lot—you go where the money is. A Ph.D. is a much longer commitment, and I had no idea if I would really want to do that. It took me a lot longer to go back for it.

BB: So, the program at Western has always been a really practical program preparing people to go out and do something in the public arena.

PB: In fact when I was there, they had a real push to get someone in there to do historic preservation. Jay Anderson came when I was there and started doing courses that would fit folklore in with historic preservation. I was with a group of students like George Reynolds who went on to Foxfire, and Hank Willett who went on to Alabama, and Linda White who was the very first folklore intern at NEA. Most of the people I went to Western with ended up making up their own jobs. There were no real public folklore jobs. I guess we didn't know why we were going to school for folklore.

I think the Western Program was established with the thought, how can this training be applied in real life? There were people in my class that were teachers and they were going because they were very interested. They could see using the things they were learning in the classroom. And then there were museum people; people who could use the training either in historical preservation or museum work. And

then there were those of us like me, who didn't really know what we were going to do with it.

Most of us ended up creating jobs for ourselves. I graduated in '75, and the country was gearing up for the Bicentennial year. Comparatively, there was a lot of money in that year, as you know, the NEA and the NEH were granting money for folk cultural programs for the first time. The NEA Folk Arts program was created. On the local level, everybody and his brother was scrambling to do something for the Bicentennial, like they're doing for the Millennium now. So, somebody who was creative and came out of a folklore program could really sell themselves as a cultural expert.

A lot of people were doing oral history projects, and so folklorists fit in right there. It was the very start of the state folk arts coordinator network that was Bess Hawes's vision. In '76, there were about six of us across the nation. There was Linda White, who ended up in Tennessee as the first Tennessee state folklorist. Charley Camp was in Maryland. Suzi Jones was in Oregon. Jane Beck was in Vermont. I was in Florida, and there were a few others. There was no model really. Jane was based at Middlebury College and Suzi was with, I think, the Historical Society, Charley was with the arts council, Linda was with the arts council, and I was with the Stephen Foster Folk Center, which is a state park.

Soon after that it seemed like every year there would be six more, so that by the end of about three or four years there was quite a network. Most people got at least three-year funding from NEA and then they were expected to have put together enough of a statewide network of a support where the state would pick up the funding. And most of us did. Some programs went by the wayside, but it is amazing how successful that initiative was. It changed the course of public folklore forever.

BB: Yeah, that's true. But I remember even when I started in Indiana as the State Folk Arts Coordinator in '82 and we would meet at AFS and it was still just one little room. Then the public program section started, and now we have to meet in the ballroom. So, you were in Florida, but the Florida program blossomed. How did that happen? At one time there were twelve folklorists there.

PB: It was really happenstance. I was the state folklorist. I was on soft money. I was hired by Al Head who was, at the time, the director or the Stephen Foster Center. He had a vision. The Stephen Foster Center had been the host organization for the Florida Folk Festival since 1953. It was set up by Sarah Gertrude Knott, director of the National Folk Festival. He wanted to have a survey done of the folk arts of the state

so that the festival could be better—because he realized that the festival needed an infusion of diversity. So, I did a survey, as best I could, around the state and recommended people for that folk festival. One thing led to another, and my job became permanent.

At the time Al had left and we had a succession of directors at that center, including one that happened to be indicted for stealing from the government. During the course of having the state investigate what the center did, they had an independent auditing firm come out to do the financials, but they also had a firm come out to find out what programs the state should continue. They concluded that really the best thing going at the center was the programs that we were doing with folk arts.

Before the audit there were many divisions in that center. There was also an “artist in residence” program and they thought this was worth saving. They took ten of the other positions, and put them into the folklife program. So, we went from two employees to twelve overnight. Like I said, if the director hadn’t been indicted, we may still have been only a small office in north Florida! Things sometimes happen like that.

Of course the director of the folklife program is a politically appointed position. And they appointed a man named Phil Werndli, who was a person who’d been in Florida government a while. A nice guy. Knew nothing about folklife, but he was a historic preservationist. He thought we were doing a good job and he came in and became director. At that point we hired all kinds of people. Doris Dyen and Ormond Loomis came; later, Blanton Owen, Nancy Nusz, Betsy Peterson, and others. There were so many people in and out of there I can’t remember. But anyway, out of adversity, the program was able to jump start. All of a sudden we became the biggest folklife program in the country. That was also about the time I had twins. So there was a lot going on.

BB: So, you left Florida when?

PB: ’89. What happened over the years, I worked in several different areas with the folklife program. In ’86 I got a fellowship to go back to school to Penn. So, I took a year’s leave of absence and went to Penn and did my course work and then came back and did the exams and wrote my dissertation on a Florida topic. And of course that took a long time. So, I left in ’89 and went to Atlanta. And I actually didn’t finish my dissertation until ’92. So, I was still working on that when I went to Atlanta and you know how that goes.

I had been in Florida for twelve years, and it was time to move on. I was able to create a new program again. Southern Arts Federation was establishing the first regional folklorist position. By this time of

course almost every state had a state folk arts program with a very strong network of folklorists. There are six regional arts organizations across the country—none of them had folk arts people. Southern Arts Federation [SAF] in Atlanta works with the nine state arts agencies in the south, and the director of the SAF looked at the arts councils he was serving and saw that all of them had a folk arts program. And he wanted to serve those staff members too.

So, he called a meeting together of all the state folk arts coordinators in the South. I went to that meeting because I was representing Florida. He basically asked us what we needed from SAF, and we gave him a whole list of things that we would love. And basically we told him that he should really hire a regional folklorist. He wrote a grant to NEA, and I ended up applying and getting the job. So now there is a program at Southern Arts, there is a program at Mid Atlantic, there's been one at WESTAF [Western States Arts Federation] out in the west. And NEFA [New England Foundation for the Arts] has one too. So, the East Coast is covered.

Regional arts organizations are interesting. They're private non-profit organizations, so they are very different from working in the states. Because, of course, in a state folk arts program you're working for state government. It's kind of like working for the federal government; there are a lot of rules and regulations. The regionals have a lot more flexibility. They answer to a board. They get a big chunk of their money from NEA, and a big chunk of their money from dues that each of the states pay to them. I found it very refreshing after having worked for Florida. You could actually plan things and have a check to an artist the next day. You really could do things in a more flexible and timely way.

BB: Did you get to do any fieldwork then, or was it pretty much administration at that point?

PB: When I went to Atlanta, I didn't do original fieldwork. What I did was I worked with the state folk arts coordinators in all the states and also the independents. I did programs. We did a series of "Musical Roots of the South" tours where I worked with artists on the road, but they had already been documented. What I would do is say to a folk arts coordinator, "Gosh, we're putting the tour on the road. Who have you worked with who would be good for this?" So, I did get to work with artists and do real programing. But, I didn't get to really go out into the field. That is the perennial problem—the more established you get the further away you get from fieldwork, the real stuff. And I think it's

important to carve out some time and some projects or some way that you can get back to why you are in the business in the first place.

BB: I know a lot of people have gone into more of an administrative position and then they have gone to even higher positions within an arts council that take them totally away from folklore.

PB: Right, and that happened to me at Southern Arts. I became Director of Programs, and I hired folklorists. Barbara Lau and then Lisa Higgins came in and they became the folk arts coordinators, and at one point I supervised seven people, including the jazz coordinator and Southern Arts Exchange manager. That does take you further away. So Barbara and Lisa got to do a lot of things like going on tour and putting together the exhibits, and I would raise the money and make sure things were managed. There are parts of administration that are really great, like the creative part of coming up with the ideas and really brainstorming how programs can happen. That's fun, but you just don't have the time then to actually get on the road and do the programs too. So, it is a trade off.

BB: Well, do you think that folklore training gives you some good background for administration in any way, or is that something we learn on the job and just apply?

PB: Actually, it's really interesting. After coming to the Library of Congress I realized that. Within the Library there are librarians that really work well with things, with books. They are introverts. And then there are those people who are people people, who like to be at the reference desk and talk to people and do the phone work and all that. I think it's the same with folklorists. I think a lot of folklorists make lousy administrators because that's not their gift, but they may be great in the field.

So I don't think that folklore programs should try to be the "be all and end all" on administrative programs. Truth be told, they should really reach out to other departments within the university to make it possible to get a degree in folklore and get credit for going to Business Administration and taking a course from the people who know. I could teach a course in administration, but I'm not really trained. I could tell people what my particular quirky little career was like, and I could give them my opinion. But I'm not an expert on administration. Or, you know, if somebody wanted to take their folklore training and become a record producer, they should be able to take an engineering course in sound design. It's a whole different language and field.

It's just like coming here to the library, in some ways. I wish I had taken a library course. I was in the arts for twenty-five years and so I learned that language—all of those acronyms. I learned all of those buzz words in the arts world, and I'm very comfortable with that. I learned not only the official language and how things work but also the gossip of the arts world, so you know who's who and how to get things done easily. The library world is just like that, but it's a whole different world. I'm learning the Library of Congress, and that's a whole culture in and of itself.

BB: Well, you are actually doing fieldwork, Peggy, because you're doing fieldwork among the librarians. The ethnography of the library culture.

PB: It's amazing, a whole other language. Learning it all and trying to make sense of that world. But I don't think a folklore program should necessarily devote their precious time to trying to teach the world of archiving in such a way. If people are really interested, say they're really focused on archiving, the folklife department should partner with the library science department. Students in folklore would then have a connection with those people in related fields that they are trying to work with for the rest of their career. Because most of us folklorists know each other really well, because we go to AFS, we keep up with each other and we have a really good rapport. I do think that those relationships are as important as anything else. It's just like they always say, "If you go to Harvard, it's not really what you're learning in the classroom, it's the connections you're making." Taking courses in other disciplines creates new inter-connectedness.

BB: Well, it was kind of a trick of fate that the Folklife Center ended up here at the Library. Are there other places that would have been a more comfortable fit with the Folklife Center itself? The archive is here, of course, that makes sense. But in terms of doing programs and fieldwork.

PB: Right—well, we have obviously a dual mission and one part of the mission is really archival, which relates to where we ended up, and the other is outreach. Also, we are very different from any other division in the library. We have our own board of trustees and separate legislation. No other Library of Congress division does. One part of our mission is very similar to other divisions in the library, but then we're looked upon as weird, I guess, because we have this Board and

this other mission—a real outreach component. Libraries are usually very orderly, and we're a little eccentric and disorderly.

At the time that the Center was created there was talk of it going to the Smithsonian. I think that the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage has its own challenges because you have to fit yourself into that museum world, and you're different from other divisions within the museum world. On the other hand, the AFC could have been a stand alone. In some ways it might have really been a lot stronger as a stand alone because you only have to answer to the board and it would be a lot more manageable in terms of administration.

The archive is really the soul of what we are all about, and it really is an incredible asset. Something that hasn't been articulated as well as it might have over the years is the fact that no matter what, what makes us different from any other national program, like the Smithsonian program or the NCTA [National Council for Traditional Arts] or any of the other national programs, is that our primary function is to take care of that collection and take a leadership role in the world of archives and libraries. And so, one of the things that is going to be really important in the coming years, now that the AFC is permanently authorized, is to have a much bigger presence within the Library of Congress itself and within the library world. This Center can be the strongest outreach grassroots program that the library has ever had, to really bring a lot of people into the library who wouldn't normally come here. We should have exhibits up. We should have things for people to do and see. We should have computer terminals set up where they can get into our collections. I can see that as being a way of getting us to articulate what makes us different.

**BB:** What do you think that the states or regions look to the Folklife Center for now?

**PB:** That's exactly what we were just talking about at our board retreat. We don't know yet because we have not asked in a long time. Mainly I think there has been a focus from the board and from the staff here on just being permanently authorized. There is always this fear that the place was not going to be here soon.

One of the things that's happened just this year is that we have a greatly expanded board, a fabulous board. We have all of our librarian's appointees, who are all folklorists. We've made the president of AFS and the president of SEM [Society for Ethnomusicology] members on our board now and they never were before, along with board representation from the Smithsonian and other organizations so that



we have a twenty-nine member board. That represents lots of constituencies that are looking to us for service. We have Mario Marino from the Department of Education and different people who are very well connected in their own world, representing constituencies that we want to work with in partnership.

Up until a couple of months ago, as one of the constituents, what I would have wanted from the American Folklife Center was for the Center to take a leadership role in setting national standards for archiving. Along those lines, we're working towards creating an ethnographic thesaurus so that everybody's using the same language. We're working on computerization models so that people can look at our National Digital Library Projects and see what might be done in their own archives. We're really making a push right now for preservation, especially sound preservation.

BB: Well, on the national level it seems like there has never been one place that states could look to—a national entity. Can there be?

PB: I think our strength is that there are about three or four national organizations that have a piece of it, and they do that piece very well. Smithsonian does its piece very well. NCTA does its piece very well. There is enough work out there that you really don't need to have one entity to be the one national program. AFS is taking more of a leadership role in the world of public folklore. The membership used to be overwhelming in the academy, but now that the majority of members have jobs in the public sector AFS is really exploring how it can be a more effective organization to help all constituents.

The AFC archive is an outstanding resource, and we are growing all the time. We are working now with the Motion Picture, Broadcast, and Recorded Sound Division of the LC as they design this incredible audiovisual center that's being built in Culpepper, Virginia. And the Library is going to have the best preservation methods for visual and audio materials. Carl Fleischhauer's working on this, and it's a multi-million dollar initiative being funded by the Packard Foundation. Our preservation office at the LC has a chamber that does advanced aging of tapes, and we're testing tapes that are on the market to find out which analog tape is the best in terms of longevity. Now, we can be a leader in that way.

BB: People are definitely very interested in trying to do what they haven't done in the past, which is trying to make sure their archive is going to last for a long time.

PB: I think we're all working in some way with education. The trick is to be sure to share knowledge so that people don't reinvent the wheel and to think more collaboratively than competitively, and to think about how projects that we're all doing on the national level will add to what other institutions are doing. As I've said before, there is enough work out there for everybody. We don't need to all be doing everything, we really need to focus in order to get it all done. It's kind of amusing to me right now, you know, we've got Bill Ferris and Bill Ivey as the heads of the endowments and there is such an incredible presence for folk arts and folklife right now like never before. So, it's a real opportunity to jump on board and move forward.

BB: I always get the feeling that people in state programs don't really understand what the national programs do and what the difference is between them. Do you think that we have a PR problem here? What can we do about that?

PB: I know, well, I think there is a certain amount of jealousy because it always appears that the national programs have so many more resources. When you're out there in the state, or independent and local programs, you're scrounging every year for money, and it's very hard and you get burned out just trying to keep the money flowing. So, when you see a program like the American Folklife Center or Smithsonian that have all these staff people and a set budget—we do have to raise money, but there's a lot of resources that are tax paid—sometimes I think they say, "Well, those are my tax dollars. What are they doing anyway?"

It's been a problem that national programs have sometimes been seen to be at loggerheads with each other—that's been a perception across the country. Programs haven't been very cooperative, and I think that's been bad for everybody. There is a new opportunity now to work together, and I think that would help everybody. It's been going on quietly all along, but people mainly see the more competitive nature of our work more than the cooperative programs. If you get all of us together, we're a pretty powerful group. However, it takes work. We hardly ever see each other; you know it's true because everyone is so busy.

BB: You are now the president elect of AFS as well. So, next year you'll be the president. Tell me a little bit more about your vision.

PB: Well, actually I think Jo Radner has really gone a long way towards a new vision for AFS. She's a very proactive president. She's really reaching out to the public sector community to find out how AFS can be a more

useful organization for everybody, recognizing the fact that, in the past ten years, we've gone from an academic society to really kind of a combination academic/professional society. I came in on the tail end of the process because as I just started in January as president elect.

Jo had already put in motion this long range planning effort and really reached out to the community and reached out at the last AFS meeting and everybody who could put their two cents worth in. She's using the Internet well, and I think that we're going to come out with a really good plan. Her vision is a lot like mine. I think AFS is one of those national organizations that's like the Smithsonian and the American Folklife Center—it has a piece of the pie. AFS has to look at what makes AFS different from the American Folklife Center. What is the role that it needs to play, that nobody else can do as well, to make the field of folklore flourish.

One of the things that AFS has that nobody else has is this incredibly strong academic base. And so I think Jo's vision of a long range plan is exactly where we should be going, which is looking at two things, diversity and education, as being two core pieces of that mission to go forward. Education in the broadest sense, and especially looking at how the training of the next generation of folklorists can be more integrated with the job market and where people need to be. We did a survey of lapsed members and why people didn't come to the annual meeting. And lot of that has to do with people not feeling connected anymore. Many of the people who are lapsed members are older members, and it's so strange because you would think that folklorists would know how to make older members feel included, but they don't necessarily do this well. So, we need to find out how we can reach out to all members and how we can use their assets.

AFS is changing into a whole different organization because AFS is nothing but the membership. And, now the membership has a very different profile from 30 years ago. The other group that I think needs to be included much much more is the graduate student group. Graduate students have always been coming because it's part of their training. But they've rarely been included on the board or given decision-making positions. That was always for "the leaders." There is a large group of us who are very active and we're all in that same middle-aged group. The older ones and the younger ones need to be pulled in. And the bottom line is that no matter what we do at AFS, a big reason why people come is, they like to see their friends.

**BB:** How do you feel about the dichotomy, or whatever you want to call it, between academic and public folklore? Do you think it's sort of coming together? Where is it at now?

PB: That's a good question. It used to be that the academic sector had all the power within AFS and public sector folklorists were outsiders looking in. It's completely turned on its head now. The academic programs, many of them, are really fighting. We, public sector folklorists, were always scrambling and trying to justify ourselves. All of a sudden the academic programs are having to justify themselves within their world, the academic world. So, in a way, they are reaching out to us as never before, perhaps because they need us. I mean they really do. And the public sector needs the academy to be strong—obviously, or there won't be any more trained folklorists.

BB: So, we need to recognize the needs on either sides.

PB: Yes. I think it's finally getting to the point where people recognize that some people don't want to teach. For some folklorists, their opinion of public folklore was that graduates were only in the public sector because they couldn't get a teaching job. But many of us never even had an inkling that they ever wanted to teach.

I think that now we need to reach out and be creative. As the academic programs really do reach out to those of us in the public sector, which I think they need to, we have a lot of skills that we can offer them about staying afloat and about developing coping mechanisms. Politically we're fairly savvy, and the academy is just a political arena that's different. I don't think most tenured professors have had to think that way. It's interesting to me that we've seen in the span of my career, several programs that were very strong are now struggling, while programs that weren't even around twenty years ago are really strong. I think that the academic programs need to meet among themselves and look at how programs can achieve stability in the twenty-first century.

BB: Why did you feel that it was important to go on and get the Ph.D., was is just a personal goal or do you feel like it is good thing to have in the public arena as well?

PB: When I went it was a very personal decision. I had been in Florida for ten years, and I really didn't know what I wanted. I knew I really needed to move on, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. Also, I really realized that after ten years of being out in the public sector I didn't know any of the new theories or cutting edge scholarship. And I thought it would be fun to go back to school and see what people were learning now. And it certainly was different than in '74 when I was at Western.

So, I talked to Kenny Goldstein and I was able to get a fellowship to go and I could take a leave of absence from work. And I thought this was perfect, and it was like a sabbatical, it was so much fun. I thought, "Oh, my job is to read!" That's the idea behind the AFS public sector residencies where you get into the academic environment and read and study, which you don't get to do very much when you're working in the public. You really don't, there is no time.

I had fun writing the dissertation. Well, there were times when it wasn't fun. But I loved doing the research. I really had no inkling that the Ph.D. would have any bearing on my career whatsoever. It didn't do anything in terms of my salary or anything like that. As a matter of fact, when I went back to Florida, I was looked on as a little bit suspect because in the arts there aren't many who have a Ph.D. But then, in the end, I wouldn't be here if I didn't have a Ph.D. But who would have thought? I mean I would have never thought that I would be here at that point.

BB: Well, there's been some talk of refresher courses and that kind of thing in folklore too. It would be wonderful if we could all have a sabbatical at some point in public folklore careers. Well, when you dream about the possibilities of folklore what could be in the future, when you are dreaming big, what are your goals?

PB: Well, I really think that we're on our way, but we have to have people in positions of power where we are setting policy, national policy. Folklorists do have a certain vision and mind set and a value system that is unspoken—we are advocates for the common man, for the disenfranchised. Unfortunately in order to be a good advocate for the disenfranchised we've got to stop being disenfranchised ourselves, we've got to be in the center, we've got to be in power. And so, having Bill Ivey and Bill Ferris as head of the NEA and the NEH is wonderful—we should really have people in the National Parks System at higher levels. We should have people who are senators and representatives.

It's funny because the entertainment world seems to be going that way, where we just had Warren Beatty considering a run for office. For so many years, celebrities have been content with using their money to back the professional politicians and now they're running themselves. If we can really step up to the plate—and obviously not everybody is cut out to be a politician—but there are some folklorists who really are very good at it. And then there are people who love to work behind the scenes, like Joe Wilson and Archie Green, they are really good lobbyists. Basically that's what they are, they are almost like

professional lobbyists for our field without getting paid. I see if we have people placed in positions of power, especially as we're entering this time when our population is getting so diverse, that folklorists could maybe make this transition to diversity not be so painful.

We're dealing with a sea change in terms of cultural and political power. The white North American culture has had dominance, and now we're entering a real crossroads. Americans are having to share power across the board. I think that if folklorists are making decisions about cultural policy, if they are able to be there in the Department of Education, if they are able to be there and to make decisions in social service programs, we can effect positive change. For instance, Mary Hufford and others are working on environmental issues in a proactive way. I think of the work that somebody like a Bill Westerman could do if he or she were to make policy for immigration and naturalization and really have a voice, the world would be a better place. I really think that that's where we're at.

BB: That's a good vision.